China Expands Its Courtesy: Saying “Hello” to Strangers

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Courtesy reveals fundamental judgments about who merits respect. Traditional Chinese courtesy rests on lifelong hierarchical bonds that are too clear to require constant verbal reinforcement. But strangers, women, peasants, migrant workers, and others often do not merit face work because they lack status, fall outside the network of insiders, or are politically taboo. Until very recently, European-style equivalents of “hello,” “please,” “thanks,” “sorry,” or “goodbye” existed only in impersonal-sounding translations restricted to brief contacts with foreigners. As Beijing steps back from the socialist revolution, it is promoting these “five courteous phrases” (ni hao, qing, dui bu qi, xiexie, zai jian) to expand courtesy to universal, reciprocal greetings. Popular acceptance of this “verbal hygiene” is spreading via rapid, urban service encounters in which one’s connections are unknown. In this way, China’s self-identity as an “advanced civilization” is being retooled in international terms.

Traditional Chinese courtesy greets people by rank and title, often as an honorary family member. People greet an elderly man as “paternal grandfather” (yeye) or a young woman as “older sister” (jiejie). Until recently, Chinese had no equivalent to uniform, Western-style greetings such as “hello,” other than impersonal-sounding translations. Yet since the early 1980s, imported courtesies have become so popular that people even teach them to babies. In remote southwestern Fujian, for example, a grandfather in a traditional Hakka circular fortress held up his two-month-old grandchild, waving its hand in a “hello” (ni hao) to visitors from the city (visit to Fujian’s Nanjing, December 10, 1989).

This seemingly trivial shift in custom points to profoundly contested shifts in social roles. All analyses are ideological and contestable, including this one. But traditional Chinese courtesy has been hierarchical and nonreciprocal, calibrated according to asymmetrical ranks of tightly defined relationships. The much-valued maxim that “insiders are different from outsiders” (nei wai you bie) governed degrees of courtesy. Relationships were oriented toward lifelong bonds whose duties were clear enough to preclude constant spoken reinforcement.

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Saying “thank you” (xiexie) to a daughter or an employee could even sound insulting, implying that the person seldom does his or her duty. But traditional usage does not provide any easy way to speak to someone whose title is unknown. When status is unclear, politeness is uncertain, and it is particularly problematic in service encounters in stores, post offices, train stations, clinics, and government offices. When many strangers compete for the same scarce commodity with no clear means of ranking their requests, the ensuing rudeness and confusion frustrate and anger both visitors and local people.

Since 1980, the Chinese Communist Party has promoted the use of “five courteous phrases” (wuge limao de ci)—impersonal, Western-derived phrases that correspond roughly to the English words “hello,” “please,” “sorry,” “thanks,” and “goodbye” (ni hao, qing, dui bu qi, xiexie, zai jian) (Renmin ribao 1980). Ultimately traceable to the highly restricted treaty port contacts with European-language speakers after 1842, the phrases were originally confined to impersonal, transient, but reciprocal adult business exchanges. The recent spread of these phrases via the largest propaganda campaign to emerge since Mao can sometimes seem silly to outsiders. In fact, the spread of the phrases maps a profound realignment of social relations. The phrases step back from the rigidly defined social roles of both Confucian and politically based revolutionary relationships to add a simple, no-cost means for extending reciprocal respect to strangers and others who did not previously merit spoken courtesies.

The 1949 revolution wiped out the old elite courtesies. Now that the revolution is complete, people cannot and do not want to simply “return” to the courtesies of fifty or a hundred years ago (as citizens of the former Soviet Union and Soviet bloc also discovered). China has changed: People are better educated, more urban, and more committed to equality. The five phrases have taken on a life of their own, especially among the wealthier, educated consumer class. The appeal is simplicity: The phrases do not demand that every social interaction be labeled. Rather, they offer a script to open an encounter, make a request, apologize, thank someone for a minor service, or end an encounter pleasantly. They also incorporate a broader community, especially Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, Overseas Chinese, as well as international contacts.

The egalitarian courtesies raise new issues of rights versus responsibilities. An important function of rites (li) is to reinforce social order. As anthropologist J. Joseph Errington points out, speakers are aware of the social significance of different levels of speech. The more “pragmatically salient” variables, such as courtesies, are most susceptible to strategic use as crucial linguistic mediators of social relations (cited in Woolard 1998, 13). In China, women, children, and service workers are increasingly expected to voice the new courtesies. Their rights to receive them, however, are unclear. Certain courtesies that formerly were reserved for elite males, especially apologies, raise deep ambivalence because they disrupt still-valued aspects of status hierarchies.
Few scholars have examined changes in courtesy. Linguists largely exclude them as irrelevant to the asocial theoretical model of syntactic “universals.” Child psychologists turn their attention elsewhere; even the pioneering measure of child language development, the mean length of utterance, excludes social phrases such as “thank you.” However, the Swiss sociologist Norbert Elias (1938) has delineated how the spread of impersonal courtesies such as “good day” accompanied the rise of powerful cities in medieval Europe. City strangers were increasingly viewed as individuals with reciprocal rights in a civil society, one in which public life could develop outside close church or state control. The new courtesies also became feminized and juvenilized as they spread across classes. Eventually, courtesies that coordinated with international standards became emblems of national identity.

Shifting customs hint at a deeply contested but similar ideological shift in China. A language ideology consists of the “self-evident ideas and objects a group holds concerning the roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group,” says linguist Shirley Brice Heath (cited in Woolard 1998, 4). Institutionalized and interaction rituals are particularly productive for analysis, anthropologist Michael Silverstein points out, because they are “privileged and value-setting sites for the enactment of ideology” (cited in Woolard 1998, 10). Rituals also form a nexus of deeply felt dispute and contestation.

Beijing’s shift to what it calls “civilized and courteous language” has received millions of words of publicity but precious little analysis. A preliminary project like this one works best as an overview, catching widely dispersed, emergent trends that are unlikely to show up in narrower, quantitative studies. Future analysis will look more systematically at historical developments, especially of apologies, and the role of courtesy for women and child socialization. The current article draws on observations, interviews, social commentary, fiction, handbooks of party procedure, and consumer guides to manners. Traditional courtesy is examined first, with brief comparisons to Japan and Indonesia. Next, each of the “five courteous phrases” is examined, for each carries problematic connotations. Over the past century, the ideology has revealed a surprising consistency in struggles for “verbal hygiene,” “cleaning up,” and “modernizing” language. The final section examines China’s twentieth- and twenty-first-century efforts to overcome the class bias of traditional courtesy, politicized efforts to overturn hierarchy, and eventual consumer demand for less politicized and more reciprocal politeness, which fits better into international communications.

**Traditional Courtesies Vary by Rank and Context**

In the United States or Germany, encounters are often transient, mechanically mediated, closely tied to the legal code, and negotiated among immigrants and strangers. Extended relationships can matter less than detailed explanations
and precise wordings. People often complain, “She didn’t even say ‘thanks’” or “He didn’t even bother to say ‘I’m sorry.’” Other cultures, such as the Navajo, the Japanese, and the Chinese, have often valued a widely shared network of stable social relations more than elaborate justifications or exact wordings. Well-understood obligations can encourage silence and deference. Courtesy can vary more than in the United States according to rank and context: Few courteous phrases appear among Chinese family members, co-workers, or in service encounters at state-run stores, train stations, or post offices. The same speakers might voice elaborate courtesies to receive guests or during an awards ceremony (Pan 2000).

Traditional Chinese courtesy remains variable but powerful into the twenty-first century. The tradition was hierarchical, calibrated by mutual obligations to a defined status. Courtesy (limao) was closely linked to morality, to the ancient rites (li) that were performed to regulate the universe, ensure social stability, and prevent conflict. According to Confucius and the Book of Rites (Li ji, ca. 500 BCE), rites had two functions: to regulate human emotions (jie, “interval”) and to refine them (wen, “writing,” “refinement,” “cultivation”) (Fung 1952, 338). The word for courtesy (limao) dates to at least 300 BCE and the philosopher Mencius. Courtesies varied according to rank in the Confucian “five relationships” (wu lun): ruler–ruled, father–son, husband–wife, elder brother–younger brother, and friend–friend. Confucians also ranked society with male scholars at top, followed by farmers (honored, at least in name, for feeding the nation), artisans or workers, and finally traders at the bottom (shi, nong, gong, shang). Prosperous traders, of course, could afford education and influence despite the disdain of scholars.

Rites and courtesy were associated with morality very differently than in Europe. As historian H. G. Creel explains, Europeans and Americans typically consider it courteous to be polite to everyone, though not necessarily a moral duty. Returning a lost object may be a moral duty, though not necessarily viewed as a courtesy. But under Chinese li, rites and courtesy encompassed both politeness and moral obligation (Creel 1953, 32). Scholar-magistrates and clan leaders were held up as moral leaders. These human, secular models differed fundamentally from the religious models of Europe, which elevated Jesus, the saints, and the clergy as moral exemplars and enforcers. The Bible (and Qu’ran) prescribes kindness to strangers, unlike the Chinese classics. Courtesy standards, by contrast, were set in the king’s court.

Proper Chinese behavior was described in surprisingly consistent detail in the twelfth-century Family Rituals of the neo-Confucian philosopher Chu Hsi (Zhu Xi), in innumerable individual clan guides, and in still-popular almanac chapters on family life (Chu Hsi 1991 [1211]; Li 1989; Liu 1959, 57). Deference toward male elders and superiors was central. Individual behavior was not emphasized, and relations with outsiders were scarcely mentioned. One gained “face” (lian) for the clan by properly tuning ones’ vertical relationships. “Face” was originally
a Chinese concept, borrowed into English around 1856. Even now, Chinese “face” is seen as separating humans from animals. Elite courtesy required years of instruction, but anyone, rich or poor, could gain face by appropriate behavior. Children could add face for their parents and teachers. Naughty children were scolded as shameless, not caring about face (bu yao lian). A “loss of face” (diu lian) might be a temporary embarrassment, but refusal to care about face was considered degenerate (mei you lian).1

An additional contrast emerged between ritualized courtesy (limao) and the other main word for courtesy, “guest treatment” (keqi, literally “guest air”). “Ritualized courtesy” selected a proper behavior for any situation, with special attention to insiders. “Guest treatment” was and is restricted to outsiders, the formalities for honored guests. The friendly phrase for “don’t stand on ceremony” or “don’t go out of your way” is “don’t treat me like a guest—or an outsider” (bu yao keqi).

Unspoken Courtesies

In cultures that hold a strong cultural consensus, much deference can be unspoken, conveyed by respectful postures, gestures, and patterns of communication, such as the number of times one refuses an offer. Under the emperors, China stressed prostrations (ketou, cf. English “kowtow”) in which one fell prostrate and knocked the forehead on the ground. The thirteenth-century philosopher Chu Hsi prescribed the numbers and types of prostrations for each family member (1991 [1211], 29–30). At a minimum, ordinary families prostrated themselves to their elders at New Year’s celebrations, weddings, and funerals. Petitioners prostrated themselves to government officials. The 1789 British mission to China failed because Lord Macartney refused to prostrate himself to the emperor. When the emperor was overthrown in the 1911 revolution, the new republic immediately abolished public prostrations in favor of bows and tips of the hat (Bell and Woodhead 1913, 659). Family prostrations have long been out of style. Yet they retain emotional resonance and occasionally survive overseas, as in some New Year’s celebrations of non-Chinese-speaking Malaysians of Chinese descent (anthropologist Chee-Beng Tan, personal communication).

Spoken Formulae

Even now, traditional Chinese spoken courtesies are not only context dependent but also far more complex than the five courteous phrases. They almost never appeared in sixty-five hours of family interactions that I recorded from highly educated mainlander families in the late 1970s in Taiwan.2 Yet I recorded innumerable well-mannered greetings, expressions of gratitude, apologies, and

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1 A different word that is also often translated as “face,” mianzi, pertains to outward appearances and the pretensions to which one aspires.
2 The sole exception came when the children called out, “Goodbye, auntie!” (ayi, zai jian!) at the end of each visit, in polite farewell to the foreign guest.
leave-takings, all conveyed by kinship and other titles and by context-sensitive comments such as “Have you eaten?” or “You’re back late.” Linguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) call these “positive politeness,” attempts to increase social connection. The response to thanks for a favor, for example, praises the pleasures of reciprocal obligation: “I ought to help you” (yingdang de) (Zhan 1992, 9, 11, 28–29, 39).

Titles

Chinese prefer to address people by title rather than by name or by a pronoun. As one classic courtesy guide which is still invoked puts it, “Men who are older, whenever addressed./Never their name but their title is best” (Li 1690). Occupational titles such as “department head” are key. Children honor teachers by addressing them as “teacher” (laoshi). Informal courtesy emphasizes kinship titles (e.g., “older brother”), which extend metaphorically to non-family members, such as customers at a village market. Unfamiliar children are not called “boys and girls” but “little brothers and sisters,” even when labeling pictures in children’s books. Polite children often combine a kinship title with an occupational title, such as “Auntie Nurse” (Hushi ayi) or “Uncle Bus Driver” (Siji bobo).

Context-Sensitive Comments

Courtesy toward superiors is taciturn. One greets a superior and takes leave by nodding slightly and stating his or her title. Informal encounters are more complex than a simple “hello” or “goodbye.” One greets the person by title, then tailors a comment to the context: “Older sister, have you eaten?” “Older brother, are you busy?” “Granny, where are you going?” “Uncle, you’re back,” “Cousin’s been shopping, huh?” “Third Brother, you look tired,” and even, in freezing Beijing winters, “Little brother, how many layers of long underwear are you wearing?” Western visitors often react to such comments almost as invasions of privacy, but these are merely conventional efforts to show sensitivity and create a connection. Worldwide, context-sensitive greetings may well be more widespread than formulaic ones. Japanese courtesy also stresses titles, with situational comments such as “Where are you going?” to equals and intimates. However, Japan’s official courtesy guidelines proscribe many conventional Chinese topics, including age, marital status, children, price of belongings, income, and physical appearance (Wetzel 2004, 170).

Class Variations

Even the poorest people value basic courtesies such as standing up for a guest and serving a cup of boiled water, if tea is too expensive. A hungry, impoverished fictional scholar remarks, “Poor people can’t be polite (bu hui keqi). People who can be polite aren’t poor” (Zhang 1984, 60). But comment itself serves as a
courtesy, used as the first, ritually required refusal of cornbread from his even poorer neighbors.

Kinship courtesies often suffice for peasants who know everyone in the village. Even today, two out of three Chinese people are peasants. Some 400 million are migrating to the cities, where they must learn yet another set of interactions. Unfamiliar courtesies can sound scary (Jung 1991, 387). One fictional official frightens a peasant woman by saying, “Please take a seat!” (qing zuo ba!) (Zhu 1986, 36). And a fictional school janitor is mocked by the courteous words, “Won’t you [honorific] sit down and rest awhile?” spoken by a red guard. The janitor, addressing the student as “chairman,” replies, “Oh, no, no! Just you [honorific] give me your orders!” (Feng 1988, 66). Poor people understand the impact of withholding courtesy. Certain Guizhou peasants refused to greet agricultural inspectors who came to force them to pull up their corn and plant less lucrative tobacco. Asking “Have you eaten?” would have obligated them to feed and house the bureaucrats (political scientist, Yali Peng, personal communication, regarding 1994 fieldwork).

**Strangers Don’t Fit**

The weakness of traditional courtesy is that one must be an insider, or at least have a relationship, to be treated well. Connections are so important that the phrase “it doesn’t matter” or “never mind” (mei you guanxi) literally means, “it has no connection [with me].” Even food offerings to the spirits mirror the ranks of Qing dynasty society. The gods, ancestors, and ghosts (shen, gong, gui) correspond to worldly government officials, family members, and strangers. Food offerings to propitiate nameless stranger ghosts are set on the ground rather than the altar. Ghosts are summoned to eat, not by title or name but with a rude, anonymous “whoo-ee!” (Martin 1981, 1).

A stranger (mosheng ren) is literally “a new person on the path between the rice paddies.” Even today, one must assess the rank of strangers—a difficult task, especially for transient encounters (Yang 1994). Strangers not only do not fit, basically one owes them nothing. Rudeness to strangers is “the Chinese disease,” argues Bo Yang (Guo Yidong, 1920– ). This Henan-born mainland writer who fled to Taiwan after 1949, and whose books are also best sellers on the mainland, Hong Kong, and Singapore, responded to the comment, “Chinese people have feelings for other human beings, but Americans don’t.” Bo replied, “Chinese people have to have a specific social relationship—such as friend—before they have humane feelings. Toward strangers, we not only have no feeling, sometimes we are downright cold blooded” (1985, 51).

This long-standing gap in relations, documented in centuries of traveler accounts and histories of rebellions, was exacerbated by decades of civil war. Judging people by their politics excluded broad sections of the population
during the 1949 revolution, land reform, and the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. The term “comrade” was restricted to those in good standing with the Chinese Communist Party; it took on status limitations equivalent to “sir” (xiānshēng), all but excluding peasants, women, and children. However, blaming the Cultural Revolution for rudeness is psychologically comforting but historically inaccurate. Massive population movement, crowding, and urbanization also extended to Taiwan, where brutal free-for-alls were also routine on buses, in stores, and at the post office well into the 1980s.

The scholarly and pop culture obsessions with face, networks, and connections obscure the reality that strangers and others without connections do not merit face work. If you are an insider, you may be treated well. If not, it doesn’t matter how you are treated. No face work is expected in many interactions, especially in many service encounters at the banks, hospitals, post offices, and state-owned stores where linguist Yuling Pan made her recordings (2000, 6, 54). The clerk has the power and the customer is the petitioner. Traditional good service is supposed to be silent. Tradition also proscribes giving face to service workers by saying “please” and “thanks.” (U.S. courtesy guides through the 1960s warned readers not to thank waiters and other service workers, lest they get ideas “above their station” in life.)

Comparisons with Japanese and Indonesian Courtesy

Even a brief comparison with the complex courtesies of Japan and Indonesia can be illuminating. Chinese, Japanese, and Indonesian ideologies share a strong emphasis on hierarchy; on distinguishing insiders from outsiders, on context-dependent, unspoken courtesies; and on largely secular models. Huge, vibrant, highly industrialized cities and media with rich, slangy, informal speech abound in all three. Japan is overwhelmingly Japanese speaking, with an unusually small percentage of minority-language speakers (Ainu, Korean, and Chinese). Japan lies deep inside the Confucian cultural zone, was never colonized, and never had a revolution or overthrew the emperor. Indonesia, by contrast, spans enormous ethnolinguistic diversity, lies outside the Confucian zone, was a Dutch colony for more than 300 years, then was occupied by Japan, and carried out a turbulent revolution. Both Japan and Indonesia differ from China in that they view courtesy as central to official language policy. Japan sets standards in Japanese. Indonesia uses an egalitarian national language, Bahasa Indonesia, for public life, employing a complex diglossia of switching between Bahasa Indonesia and high and low levels of local languages, especially Javanese.

3“Comrade” has also come to mean a “gay man,” in mischievous Hong Kong and Taiwan slang that has spread to the mainland.
Japan and Indonesia had little choice about setting out standards for courtesy in schooling, media, and public life. It is almost impossible to produce a sentence without making numerous courtesy decisions in either Japanese or Javanese, the language of two-thirds of the latter nation’s people, spoken especially on Java, the largest island, home of both the colonial and modern capitals. Most European languages make a fairly binary distinction between familiar and polite pronouns and verbs (e.g., tu and vous in French). But for speakers of Japanese or Javanese, the same sentence, such as “I will give you the rice,” translates into at least five almost completely different sentences according to the degree to which the speaker humbles himself or herself, whether the speaker elevates the addressee, and the formality of the occasion. Different vocabularies are required, along with different grammar for nouns, pronouns, verbs, politeness particles, titles, and honorifics. In both Java and Japan, courtiers served as speech models (as they still do in Thailand).

The Dutch tolerated a weak Javanese royal house, which served as a prestige speech model. But Dutch became the most desirable language of social mobility, a lingua franca across much of Indonesia, along with a simplified, commonly used trade form of Malay. After the Japanese occupation, Indonesian revolutionaries discarded Dutch, standardized trade Malay into Bahasa Indonesia, and made it the national language of schooling and public life.

Citizens across Indonesia needed a respectful way to communicate. Speakers, including many Javanese, welcomed Bahasa Indonesia’s simplicity and lack of self-denigrating and flattering forms. Many Javanese continue to switch between Bahasa Indonesia and at least two styles of Javanese: the earthy, slangy Ngoko speech and the very different, elevated, formal levels of Krama styles. Javanese media also switch among many styles. In 1991, an official Javanese Language Congress worked at setting standards for Javanese styles. Meanwhile, Bahasa Indonesia has become the prestige language for public occasions. Switching to Bahasa Indonesia is often a way of marking courtesy. Some Javanese-style courtesy distinctions have crept into Bahasa Indonesia. But crucially, they can be used reciprocally and symmetrically by all speakers (Errington 1986, 1998).

In Japan, the Meiji reformers began standardizing Japanese in the mid-nineteenth century, when dialects across the country were often unintelligible. Japan set courtesy standards along with universal school curricula, publishing detailed courtesy guidelines in 1902, 1921, 1941, 1952, and 1996 (Wetzel 2004). Modern Japan is overwhelmingly Japanese speaking; few people need to switch languages to make themselves understood in everyday life. Japan was never a colony. Instead, it imposed Japanese as the “language of the gods” on its own colonies, especially Korea, Taiwan, and occupied China. Japan never had a revolution. Language standards have become more colloquial and egalitarian, but many levels of deference, respect and formality, and keigo “honorifics” remain, in addition to a rarified language for the imperial household (Wetzel 2004).
China, by contrast, deposed its emperor in 1911. Little sentiment existed for reviving the imperial house, partly because its members were ethnic Manchus rather than ethnic Han Chinese. Unlike Japan or Thailand, China did not have a national hereditary aristocracy. Instead, China was administered by scholar-officials who passed civil service exams open, in theory, to any male who could afford an expensive education. After the classical exams were abolished and the Republic established in 1911, China set modern colloquial Mandarin language standards for schooling and public life, inspired by the Japanese national language model (Guoyu = Japanese kokugo). Classical writing style was replaced by more easily learned colloquial styles based on spoken Mandarin. (For an overview of language policy, see Erbaugh 1995.)

The many Chinese “dialects,” including Cantonese, Hakka, Shanghai Wu, and Taiwanese Southern Min, are not mutually intelligible. They differ as much from Mandarin as European languages such as English do from German, Swedish, or Dutch. Under Chinese Nationalist policy, dialects and minority languages such as Miao were supposed to be replaced by standard Mandarin. Japanese-occupied areas on Taiwan and the mainland were at least statutorily required to use Japanese in schooling and public life. When the Chinese Nationalist government fled to Taiwan in 1949, it took the Mandarin-only model with it. Taipei vigorously suppressed Taiwanese, Hakka, and minority-language speakers, firing non-Mandarin-speaking teachers and civil servants and beating children for speaking anything other than Mandarin at school until the pro-Taiwanese Democratic Progressive Party took power in 2000.

The Communists replaced the Nationalists’ Japanese-style national language model with Soviet-style recognition of minority languages and tolerance for dialect bilingualism, a simple, inexpensive, and necessary tactic for recruiting illiterate peasant guerrillas. After 1949, Beijing promoted a standardized Mandarin (Putonghua) as the “common language” for schooling, public life, and the media but continued to tolerate dialects. It also developed Romanization as an aid to literacy and data processing and simplified the written characters. Writing style is much more colloquial than in Hong Kong or Taiwan.

Unlike Indonesia or Japan, but like England and the United States, China’s standards for courteous language do not come from linguists. Mainland linguists avoid setting courtesy standards because of their political implications. Chinese spoken courtesy, much like English—or Xhosa—is expressed largely through word choice, intonation, and gesture. As anthropologist Judith Irvine (1998) points out, no direct connection links social systems, such as royalty or a democratic government, with language forms. Some nations, including China and England, have maintained royal houses without elaborate grammar for honorifics.
THE AWKWARDNESS OF THE FIVE COURTEOUS PHRASES

European-language speakers mistakenly assume that the five phrases are universal. But most world languages probably lack a simple phrase for “thank you.” For example, spoken thanks insult a close relationship among the Zulus, the Henyang people of Malaysia, and the Yolngu aboriginal Australians, among many other cultures. People do a favor because they are obligated to do so or because they want to. Thanks are irrelevant. Japanese also lacks a single word corresponding to the English term “thank you,” which is appropriate for both peers and superiors. Japanese phrases of gratitude for a gift or favor overlap with words of apology and obligation, especially sumi masen, literally meaning “it never ends” (Wierzbicka 2003, 156–58).

China’s “five courteous phrases” have the attraction of simplicity. They are, in theory, reciprocal, appropriate for all classes, including strangers, and quick enough for hurried exchanges (e.g., pushing off of a crowded bus). Future president Jiang Zemin praised them on television as easy enough for children to use, yet preserving the behavioral distinctions that Chinese civilization so values (Renmin ribao 1980). The phrases do not eliminate the old courtesies but expand on them. Foreign imports do not imply wholesale Westernization or Japanization. The phrases are becoming increasingly Chinese, no longer “translatese.” Their popularity is fueled less by emulation of foreign lifestyles than by changes internal to China. Chinese have adapted Western name cards since the 1920s and Christmas cards since the 1980s to consolidate their own lateral social networks; imported courtesies have their uses as well (Erbaugh 2000). But because each phrase developed out of treaty port contacts with Europeans, reinforced by contacts with the Soviet Union and Japan (Chen 1984, 28–34), they risk sounding as ludicrous as saying bonjour or merci at an Arkansas gas station. Each phrase becomes lumbered with contradictions.

“Hello” versus ni hao, “Greetings to those from afar”

“Hello” is translated as ni hao, but its connotations come closer to “greetings to those from afar.”4 At least some university students believe the phrase came from English sailors saying “Kneel, whore!” in the treaty ports (linguist Samuel Cheung, personal communication, regarding a 1990 letter from an American teacher of English in northeast China). This etymology is almost certainly wrong. But it illuminates the foreignness and awkwardness of ni hao. The concept of an impersonal “hello” has often been unclear. Sophisticated children of Sichuan high officials thought “hello” sounded bizarre in the 1950s:

4Often, an honorific “you” (nin) is used. Nin was originally geographically restricted to Beijing, where Red Guards tried to ban it. But now nin appears in advertising and propaganda posters, especially those directed at women (e.g., “please use birth control”). Ni hao adapts the long-standing custom of stating the person’s title or name plus hao, “greetings” (literally, “good”), as in “greetings to the teacher/good morning, teacher” (laoshi, hao), which children say each morning.
Foreigners [in foreign films] said “hello” all the time with an odd intonation. I did not know what “hello” meant; I thought it was a swear word. When boys played “guerrilla warfare,” which was their version of cowboys and Indians, the enemy side would have horns glued onto their noses and say “hello” all the time. (Jung 1991, 247)

Taiwan children used to run after Europeans, throwing pebbles and yelling “hello.” Some assumed that “hello” meant “Caucasian.” “Here come two ‘hellos’” (liangge “hello” lai le), two children commented as my friend and I walked by in 1975. A Hong Kong mother was overheard teaching her son in Cantonese that “hello” meant “Caucasian” (gwai lou, literally “ghost fellow”) (linguist Stephen Matthews, regarding a 1980s experience). Even now, a foreigner who says *ni hao* often finds that communications immediately shut down. Often, no natural-sounding reply is available. Used by a foreigner, *ni hao* says, “Greetings, I am a foreigner.” Salespeople may respond with a higher price (Christensen 2006). A fictional German engineer working in China constantly says *ni hao* in Zhang Xianliang’s popular comic novella and film *The Black Cannon Incident* (directed by Huang Jianxin in 1985). His interpreter is forced to explain, “The foreigner just said *ni hao*” to prod the Chinese co-workers into hurried replies of *ni hao*. Chinese-language textbooks for foreigners increase the frustration by coaching students in unnatural interactions; one popular series is even titled *Ni Hao*.

Among Chinese speakers, *ni hao* most often appears as an impersonal, honorific salute to groups of strangers. Hosts say it to foreign groups. Many courtesy books, in fact, define *ni hao* as a greeting for foreigners. One Beijing native says, “Mostly I say it to foreigners, because they expect it. I try not to say it to say it to Chinese” (Jiansheng Guo, personal communication). Chinese speakers do not use it among neighbors, classmates, co-workers, or family members, who merit a title or name and a contextual comment, such as “You’ve been shopping.”

Extensive observations in Nanjing in 2002 and 2005 found almost zero use of *ni hao* among Chinese acquaintances, who used titles and comments instead. Among business associates, a hurried *ni hao* signaled that the speaker had no time to talk (Christensen 2006).

But *ni hao* is gaining ground, especially when people are first introduced, in the slightly less stilted form *ni hao ma*? Adding the question particle *ma* makes it friendlier and invites a response, as in English, “Fine, and you?” (*hen hao, ni ne?). Speakers can then exchange name cards, which supply the titles and affiliations required to lubricate more normal inquiries about whether the person has eaten, is tired, or has traveled far. Formulaic greetings comparable to “good morning,” *bonjour*, or “hi” are not used, especially not with strangers on the

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5 Japanese *konnichiwa*, “greetings” or “hello,” is also inappropriate for family, friends, and close associates.
street (although people in Hong Kong may say “good morning,” jou sahn, to acquaintances). However, recent articles have praised the Swiss, who greet strangers with grüsse, and the Uighurs of Xinjiang, who greet everyone, Han or non-Han, with shalom (Arabic, “peace [be with you]”)—which the author glosses as nin hao (Beijing qingnian bao 2001; Minzu wenhua 2002).

Western greetings do double duty as attention getters. The Chinese call “hey!” (wei!) to someone who is not listening, but this is too rude for a service worker or a friendly approach. When the name or title is unknown, it is hard to get attention. Ni hao remains awkward, and the equivalent of “good morning” is less natural still. Calling a clerk or waitress “miss” (xiaojie) can be problematic because it can carry connotations of “prostitute.” (In Hong Kong, people often say English “missy” instead.) Moreover, it is the customer who is supposed to speak first, simply to request an item. No greeting or pleasantries are expected (Pan 2000). But if one does not know what to ask for, or the clerk is not paying attention, no single phrase is available. “Master” (shifu, as in “master carpenter,” used for both sexes) and “sir” (xiansheng) are gaining ground. The Cantonese say mg o i, literally “[I] should not, here, a swell sah here requests and thanks, much like the German bitte or Japanese domo for “please/may I/thank you.” M goi is spreading rapidly into urban Mandarin, along with other Cantonese expressions via Hong Kong movies, tourists, and investors.

“Please” versus qing, “Might I offer you …”

The term “please” is usually translated as qing, which retains connotations of “might I offer you… .” Qìng is much more Chinese than ni hao, but it is still extremely formal, traditionally confined to offerings from a superior, such as “please take a seat.” Tradition demands repeated refusals. This hardly speeds up business. Waiters and other service workers risk sounding pretentious, if not cheeky, if they say qing. It is not conventionally used toward colleagues, friends, or children, for it violates both hierarchy and the desire for closeness, sounding cold, pretentious, or sarcastic (Chen and Yu 1985, 32). A Hong Kong writer struggles, even when she writes in English to her estranged children, “I shall ask you … humbly, saying this borrowed word ‘please’ to you, even though you are my children…” (Tao 1986, 216).

Qìng is traditionally restricted to offers and followed by a verb. A teacher who says “please” (qing) to her students risks undermining her authority. She would not say it even to urge students to eat a holiday treat (linguist Yung’O Biq, personal communication). Using qìng to request services such as a cup of tea sounds contradictory because one is not offering a favor. Asking an urban stranger for directions or information with qìng wen “might [I] ask” has become common. But among acquaintances, or in the countryside, it is so formal that it can carry sarcastic tones of “would you be so kind as to… .” More traditional requests such as mafan ni, “may I trouble you to …,” also risk sounding sarcastic to
service workers, though they are more acceptable among equals. *Laojia nǐ* “[I’m] putting you to some trouble” is a bit more natural, used with equals and superiors, but it is extremely old-fashioned. The Cantonese equivalents are less jarring, but the ubiquitous *m goi*, “excuse me/I shouldn’t,” is far more popular.

**“Excuse me” versus *dui bu qi*, “I cannot rise to face you”**

“Excuse me” is translated as *dui bu qi*, literally “[I] cannot rise to face [you]” (a variant of *dui bu zhu*, “[I] cannot remain facing [you]”). These verbal prostrations, like the English “please forgive me,” are restricted to accepting responsibility for a serious error that demands reparations. The addressee must have the status to both merit an apology and grant absolution. In one film, a village wife says it to her husband as she kneels down and tells him that she has been raped (he chops her head off with an axe). In another film, a poorly constructed village school collapses, killing many children. An anguished village leader shouts it in apology to their parents (*Bai nian youhuan* 1989). A starving fictional 1940s father said it to his family after he sold off his daughter as a servant (*Zhang* 1984, 131). Mao Zedong, who divorced his second wife while she was in Moscow seeking medical treatment, said it upon her return (*Lin* 1987, 141). Student protesters in 1989 carried posters of detested Premier Li Peng saying it to the beloved, deceased Premier Zhou Enlai. An even more weighty apology is *bao qian*, literally, “to embrace a deficiency, to regret.” A university vice president said it to a program head after firing a professor who had harassed a student in the program (*Dick Kraus*, regarding a 1989 experience).

Children and subordinates, including the harassed student, do not traditionally receive apologies. For example, when a mother and father returned home late one night in the 1930s to find their children weeping in fear at being left alone, they did not say, “We’re sorry.” But they comforted the children with a sugary treat and never left them alone again (*Wong* 1945, 21). Customs are changing, however, as only children receive more adult-like treatment. *Courtesy for Contemporary Chinese* (*Huang* 1978) urges mothers to apologize for stepping on a child’s foot or breaking a toy. Parents can feel ambivalent: They long for filial respect but want to treat their children as near equals. Essayist Bo Yang praises apology:

> Have any of you ever heard a Chinese admit that he had made a mistake? If you ever hear a Chinese say, “this is my fault” you should applaud for the future of our race. Once I spanked my daughter when she was little, but I had actually been wrong in punishing her…. I picked her up and said “Forgive me (*dui bu qi*), Daddy was wrong….” I felt bad for a long time. But I also felt incredibly proud because I had told my own daughter that I’d made a mistake. (*Bo* 1985, 28)

Service workers are understandably reluctant to say *dui bu qi* because it assumes responsibility for problems that are often beyond their control, such as running

Unsettled views of rights and responsibilities make apologies a nexus for competing values. Even a handbook that assesses “please” and “thank you” as “fairly easy to learn” considers “I’m sorry” (*dui bu qi*) as “considerably more complex” (Huang 1978, 92–93). One hotline offered operators to make free phone calls of apology if requested by any Harbin citizen (*China Daily*, December 26, 1995). Just days before the Beijing massacre, General Secretary Zhao Ziyang caused excitement with his televised *dui bu qi* apology to student hunger strikers (BBC 1989). Zhao knew very well what was coming; this apology to subordinates was likely a factor in his later house arrest.

Minor lapses such as sneezing or stepping on someone’s foot would not traditionally require a *dui bu qi*; they are not considered offenses, much less breaches of promise. An extremely old-fashioned phrase exists for pushing through crowds, “coming through!” (*jie guang!* literally “lend [me] some light!”). But in many situations that require an apology in Europe, the Chinese avoid confrontation by remaining vague about who is responsible. Sometimes sophisticates even use the English word “sorry” to substitute for more emotion-laden Chinese terms, especially in Hong Kong or Singapore. An English “sorry” after bumping into someone can seem lighter and more appropriate; “sorry” also avoids the difficult conversation and replies that *dui bu qi* provokes. Foreign tourists cause confusion when they use *dui bu qi* inappropriately to get attention, as the English “excuse me” does. A Chinese equivalent to “excuse me” is the one phrase that one very well-mannered, elderly U.S. tourist most wanted to learn. No simple equivalent exists. The best choice is often “may I ask” (*qing wen*).

“Thanks” versus *xiexie*, “I couldn’t possibly accept”

“Thanks” is usually translated as *xiexie*, “I couldn’t possibly accept,” which traditionally conveys gratitude to a superior for an extraordinary favor. Offers should be refused at least three times. When the office staff in one novel insists on paying for a wedding for two cooks in its cafeteria, the future bride finally “flops down on her knees, crying, ‘I thank you, and I thank the high-level leaders’” (Zhu 1986, 34). *Xiexie* retains problematic etymological overtones of refusal. Closely related phrases include “to refuse an offer” (*xie jue*), “to be unavailable to guests” (*xie ke*), “to apologize for wrongdoing” (*xie zui*), “to depart” (*xie bie*), and “to die” (*xie shi*).

Negative connotations are stronger in non-Mandarin dialects. Cantonese distinguishes between small, medium, and large unexpected favors. “I shouldn’t” (*m goi*) is appropriate for minor help, such as opening a door or picking up a
dropped object. Bigger favors, such as lending a small sum or filling in for a colleague at a meeting, deserve a “thank you very much,” corresponding to “Honestly, I really shouldn’t” (m goi sai). But an unexpected gift, acceptance of congratulations, or a major favor all require a minimum of three refusals, followed by a “many thanks indeed,” “I am truly grateful to you” (duo je lei; Mandarin, duo xie ni) (Matthews and Yip 1994, 369–70).

Xiexie offers thanks for a favor beyond the call of duty. Many would feel deeply hurt if a close relative, friend, or colleague said it, implying a breach of responsibility (linguist Kaidi Zhan, personal communication). Others consider it hypocritical and unnecessary to say “please” or “thanks” to family members (Pan 2000, 144). Customers who say xiexie to service workers may unwittingly convey a sarcastic “don’t put yourself out!” A Hong Kong man fearing retaliation, for example, reproved his Americanized brother for saying it to a waiter (Samuel Cheung, personal communication). The focus is on performing the task, not giving face to the worker. A Beijing émigré finds it odd that U.S. store clerks say “thanks.” “Thanks for what?” he asks (Jiansheng Guo, personal communication). An urban Chinese customer might possibly say “thanks,” but the clerk would not likely reply. Replies are more likely in privately owned businesses (Pan 2000). The equivalent to a U.S.-style “thanks for coming in” is a rather formal phrase, printed on signs over the exit (xiexie guanglin, literally, “thanks for the arrival of your luminousness”). Some waiters and clerks have been trained to say it, especially at Japanese-owned businesses in China, where it functions as equivalent to Japanese “welcome / we appreciate your coming in” (irasshai (mase)).

“Goodbye” versus zai jian, “farewell”

The translation of “goodbye” is zai jian, literally, “see [you] again,” “till we meet again,” modeled on the French au revoir, Spanish hasta la vista, or German auf wiedersehen. But zai jian is reserved for nonroutine farewells over an unpredictable and extended period, much like the Japanese sayonara. Zai jian is often used with foreign tourists, as it is closer to “farewell” or bon voyage. Newscasters and other hosts of formal but regular encounters say zai hui “[until our] next meeting.” A clerk who said zai jian in a state-owned store could convey the once-ludicrous implication that the customer had a choice over where to shop. People do not tempt fate by saying zai jian to co-workers, classmates, neighbors, or family; one simply announces, “I’m leaving” (wo zou le), with optional, contextual wishes that they eat soon, study hard, take it easy, or, if they are elderly, walk slowly (man zou). Urban sophisticates, including men, sometimes also add “bye bye” in English.6

6In the United States, “bye bye” is almost entirely restricted to women; men use a single syllable “bye.” The Chinese use of “bye bye” is reinforced by a pun with the word bai, “to worship the gods,” which is accompanied by a respectful hand gesture.
Unstable Usage

Usage is still in flux, reflecting rapid social change (cf. U.S. uncertainties over whether to call a woman Mrs., Miss, Ms., or by her first name). The new Chinese courtesies grow less predictable the farther one moves away from major cities or from Mandarin-, Cantonese-, or Shanghai Wu–speaking areas. Many dialects have no equivalents. One index of unfamiliarity is the burgeoning sales of courtesy guides, in printings of twenty million, with elaborate explanations of the phrases, as well as translations of “good morning,” “good evening,” and even “hi” (hai), popular despite being a pun with Mandarin for “calamity” (Huang 1978, 23–25; He and Huang 1988; Kan 2000).7 Combinations remain unsettled. In Fujian, waitresses call out “Hello! Goodbye!” (ni hao! zai jian!) to potential customers on the street. A maid cleans a hotel room and says “thanks” (xiexie) to the guest. For toasts at a university farewell banquet, one bureaucrat says “thanks” in English; the dean clicks his glass and responds “hello!” (ni hao!) in Mandarin. Popular writing in Taiwan often writes san Q (three Qs) or QQQ for the English pronunciation of “thank you.”

Mechanical Tone

These phrases often strike Chinese as machine-like, devoid of human feeling (mei renqing wei). Their reciprocal egalitarianism neutralizes precisely the social distinctions that many people value. Polish speakers also feel that courtesy must be selective to rank and relationship (Wierzbicka 2003, 106). In the United States, the phrases are so mechanical that many women, home alone, will say, “excuse me” after sneezing or bumping into a chair. U.S. travelers to China often feel that the Chinese are rude when they do not use a lubricating phrase. But Chinese in the United States hear the phrases so often that they may feel that “Americans don’t distinguish between people and things” (linguist Kaidi Zhan, personal communication). The essayist Bo Yang complains,

When Chinese people first arrive in the U.S., their biggest problem is the excessive politeness of Americans. When someone brushes you on the street, even if they bumped you for just an instant, even if they didn’t really bump you at all, they have to say, “excuse me” (dui bu qi).... “Thank you” intimidates me the same way that “excuse me” does, it weighs equally heavily. It’s hard to believe that there are people who spit these words out without a thought. (1985, 162–63)

Yet even Bo Yang is ambivalent. He mocks the United States as “too polite,” “the Nation that Lines Up” (paidui Guo), even as he excoriates the “Chinese people

7The book uses a new character for “hi,” which is pronounced /hai/ but means “ocean,” with an added semantic radical for “mouth.” “Hi” is reinforced by a pun with the Cantonese hai, “it is,” “yes,” and with the Japanese hai, which is used to respond to one’s name or to mean, “yes, I understand.”
who are ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ compared with Americans,” because the Chinese “won’t even say ‘thank you’ or ‘pardon me’” (1985, 169, 302). Japanese speakers’ near continuous use of courtesy formulae can also strike Chinese as hypocritical, especially to the older generation, which remembers kneeling to Japanese soldiers during the occupation.

Machine-mediated encounters are the most frequent setting for the five phrases. In fact, the English “hello” (British “hallo”) became widespread only after New York telephone operators adapted it in the late nineteenth century; “hello” was considered vulgar well into the 1940s (Fischer 1992, 71, 86). Almost every Chinese etiquette or business handbook explains the phrases in a chapter on phone courtesy, urging readers to take a message rather than barking, “He’s not here!” and hanging up. Broadcasters have long opened the news with “greetings to each honored viewer” (gewei guanzhong, dajia hao) and closed with “good evening” (wan an), “thank you for watching” (xiexie ni shoukan), or “till we meet again” (zai hui). ATMs, telephones, and web sites use the phrases lavishly, as in “we offer our deepest apologies. The web site you have searched for is unavailable… .” (feichang baoqian, mei you chadao baoshe…). Microsoft PowerPoint presentations end with a full screen xiexie, English “thank you,” or both. The phrases are common in advertising—for example, a slogan-like “thanks!” (xiexie!) printed inside soda can pop-tops. Foreign films, cartoons, and television shows, dubbed into Chinese, provide many models. Chinese-made media use the phrases much more lavishly than in real life.

“Civilizing” Ideology and the Historical Spread of Courtesy in Europe and China

Ideologies are intimately connected with “those power relations and interests that are central in a social order,” as anthropologist Judith Irvine describes (1998, 52). In Europe, routine courtesies took centuries to spread through medieval and Renaissance France and Germany, as sociologist Norbert Elias (1938) details. The oldest courtesies were personal and kinship based, much like in China. Unlike those in China, however, European greetings often took religious forms: “Goodbye” comes from “God be with you.” European courtesy was viewed as largely separate from morality—at most, “kind words, kindly expressed.” The most elaborate courtesy instruction was reserved for princes and other male nobility grooming for public life. The spread of simplified courtesies was linked to social mobility in the late Middle Ages, with exposure to strangers in the increasingly independent cities. The earliest English word for “politeness” comes from a word for “polish,” the opposite of roughness. “Courtesy,” a much more recent word, comes from the “courtly” behavior in the French king’s court. “Etiquette” comes from a French word for “a ticket,” a
cheat sheet listing out polite phrases for courtiers and diplomats. European development of routine courtesy is deeply intertwined with the concepts of individual rights, secularism, and citizenship. “Civility,” a rather recent word, derives from “appropriate to a citizen,” cf. “civilization.”

“Civilization” Is Linked to Education Rather Than Citizenship in China

The Chinese words for “civilization” (wenhua) and “enlightened” or “civil” (wenming) connote education and literacy rather than a royal court, city life, or citizenship. Wen had the original meanings “written language,” “script,” “Chinese characters,” and, by extension, “civilization” or “cultivation.” The modern two-syllable word for “civilization” (wenhua) was coined by Meiji Japanese scholars in the late nineteenth century as they translated European works of sociology, including Marx. They combined the Chinese characters (kanji) for “script” (wen) and “transformation” (hua) (Japanese pronunciation, bunka). The Chinese word for “enlightened,” “cultivated,” or “civilized” (wenming) is literally “written language” (wen) plus “clear or bright” (ming). A huge number of modern Chinese words, including “republic,” “citizen,” “constitution,” “factory,” and “car,” were coined by Japanese modernizers. Chinese students in Japan borrowed these into Chinese, often with slightly different connotations. In twenty-first-century China, the link between education and civilization holds even tighter because “civilized” (wenhua) has also come to mean “literate.” All these terms pay homage to the scholar-official.

In both Europe and China, an important mark of so-called civilization emerges when increasing numbers of adults demand different, more controlled standards of behavior than spontaneous habits, as are often found among peasants and children. Elias describes how routinized European courtesies first spread among upwardly mobile urban males, then to women, and only much later to children (1938, xiii, 59, 76). Elaborate adult refinements required intensive instruction but became juvenilized as they spread. A critical point came when the Dutch philosopher Erasmus published his 1530 guidebook De Civilitate Morum Puerilium (On civility in children), which discusses many issues now considered uncouth except in whispered warnings, such as spitting, farting, and urinating. Unlike any previous work on etiquette, Erasmus targeted the general public, not a particular class. As education became universal, courtesy training became part of child care—women’s work. In the United States, women have been the arbiters of courtesy since the nineteenth century, from Catherine Beecher to Emily Post to Miss Manners. Almost the first words that U.S. babies learn are “hi” and “bye.” “Please” and “thank you” are stressed throughout preschool, while the kinship terms that the Chinese find indispensable, such as “second cousin,” remain matters of confusion even to U.S. adults.
CHINESE REVOLUTIONS AND COURTESY

China predated Europe in publishing courtesy guides. These were not aimed at individuals but were written for the collective, as guides for elaborate clan rites, which were explicitly linked to morality. Even in the twelfth century, guides seldom mentioned class but addressed all families who wanted to be “civilized.” Broader views of a general public emerged in late nineteenth-century Qing dynasty efforts to develop a morality that transcended the clan with a progressive government. Ideals of a moral government were central to the 1911 revolution that established the Republic of China, as well as to the anti-Confucian May Fourth protests of 1919. Even clan guides were modernized a bit in the 1920s (Liu 1959, 184). Early in the twentieth century, historian Ruth Rogaski explains, leaders of the new republic constantly linked the need to improve propriety, personal hygiene, and sanitation to the discourse of modernization and international respect. “Personal hygiene and public health administration became markers of civilization and modernity in the context of high imperialism. Weisheng (hygiene) had become ‘hygienic modernity’: a totalizing prerequisite for qualification as an autonomous nation” (2004, 167–68). Political scientist Anne-Marie Brady discusses how President Sun Yat-sen’s 1924 foundational speech, “The Three People’s Principles,” criticized the Chinese people for a lack of concern about manners and personal grooming, earning them the disdain of foreigners (emphasis added by Brady). The respect of foreigners, Sun argued, was indispensable for reclaiming China’s right to govern itself, free from foreign occupation (2003, 26). The discourse about China’s deficiencies, Rogaski argues, appealed to everyone who wanted clean water and streets free of feces, garbage, and rude treatment. But it appealed especially to Chinese elites who wanted to “distance themselves from identification with peasants and their ‘lacks.’” The attainment of “hygienic modernity” of both body and behavior, unfortunately, required constant policing, a medical and moral revolution that seemed far away (Rogaski 2004, 168, 201, 226).

Overtly PoliticizedCourtesy: The New Life Movement versus Class Struggle

As civil war blew in, the newly created public school system sought to improve the etiquette and hygiene of the nation. Attention reached a peak in 1934. After a purge of leftists that forced the Communists onto their Long March, and nose-to-nose with a Japanese invasion, the Nationalist Party launched a gigantic propaganda campaign, the New Life movement. The campaign invoked a modified Confucianism with fascist overtones, including ninety-five rules of individual propriety: Be courteous, no loud talking, spitting, or slouching, take regular cold showers, and always button the top shirt button. The rules affected mostly Nationalist Party members, civil servants, and students. No increased funds for health, welfare, or education ensued. People mocked the
rules as an inane diversion for a nation teetering on the brink of invasion and civil war (Eastman 1974, 66–73; Rogaski 2004, 238–39).

The Communists condemned refined behavior as counterrevolutionary. Mao wrote, “a revolution is not a dinner party or writing an essay…. it cannot be so refined (yazhi), so … courteous (gong), restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another” (1927, 28). The Communists recruited the workers and peasants who had most to gain from land reform. Far from the U.S. stereotype of a “classless society,” the Communists turned Confucian hierarchy on its head to elevate workers, peasants, and soldiers (gong, nong, bing) to the top ranks. Scholars, and traders or capitalists, were purged from the old privileged ranks (shi, nong, gong, shang), and soldiers were added. Both moral and political leadership shifted to those “common people” (renmin) in good political standing. The Red Army drilled soldiers to behave well toward civilians with an easily memorized “Eight Points of Attention” (Ba xiang zhuyi). Point one is “speak politely” (shuohua heqi). Children still memorize the Eight Points and follow the model of peasant soldier “Comrade Lei Feng.” An orphan, Lei Feng transferred his loyalties from the clan to revolution; he is as famous for his good deeds to strangers as he is for his tear-stained, heavily edited, posthumously published diary.

After 1949, Beijing’s land reform and class struggle continued to elevate workers, peasants, and soldiers of both sexes. Annual March hygiene campaigns dredged sewers, killed flies, planted trees, vaccinated people, and urged good deeds but did not focus on courtesy. People shunned elaborate courtesies as dangerous emblems of privilege. Simple kinship and situational courtesies prevailed but became politicized. “Polite language was not to be used toward ‘enemies of the people’” (Chen and Yu 1985, 29). Making snap political assessments of strangers and nonsocialist foreigners was especially tricky.

During periods of intense class struggle, such as land reform or the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), former elites came under especially harsh attack. Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, led many of the most intense campaigns with the slogan, “Never forget class struggle!” In 1966–67, Red Guards attacked refinements as marks of privilege or treasonous foreign connections, as when a woman was punished for saying “thank you” too often (Jung 1991, 290). Some city greetings became ultrapoliticized. People struggled to ask, “Have you made revolution?” (nin ge le ming?) and to reply, “Yes, I have (ge le), (cf. Heil Hitler). Hearing “Sailing the seas, we need a helmsman,” was supposed to prompt the second line of the revolutionary song, “For revolution, we need Mao’s thought” (Chen 1984, 31; Jung 1991, 399). This response pattern is not entirely different from very old-fashioned rural Mexican greetings that use the lines of a prayer: “Hail Mary,” “Conceived in truth [sic]” (Hill 1998, 71). A 1971–72 campaign against Confucius positioned the sage as a surrogate figure for attacks on class privilege, “treasonous” political leaders, and Nationalist Taiwan, which emphasized a Confucian ideology.
Steps Back from Class Struggle: The Campaign for “Civilization” and Courtesy

Heavily politicized interactions diminished after Mao died in 1976 and Cultural Revolution faded. Beijing repudiated violent confrontations; deemphasized model workers, peasants, and soldiers; rehabilitated many refined people; and, by 1980, praised refined speech (*Renmin ribao* 1980). In January 1981, the nation watched the televised trial of Mao’s widow, Jiang Qing, as she was dragged from the courtroom, screaming and in chains, upon receiving a death sentence (later reduced to life imprisonment). *People’s Daily* denounced her by quoting Confucius in a front-page headline: “It is still good to be a little more ‘Temperate, Kind, Courteous, Restrained and Magnanimous’” (Yang 1981). A February “proposal for launching activities to promote decorum and courtesy” appeared (*Guangming ribao* 1981), sponsored by the trade unions, the Youth League, the Women’s Federation, the Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the Public Health Campaign Committee, the Student Federation, the China Society of Ethics, the Society of Linguistics and Philology, and the National Society of Aesthetics. The Propaganda Department, Ministry of Health, and Public Security Bureau followed up with a “Circular on Fostering Civil Manners” (1981).

The propagandists then launched a deliberately bland March campaign to calm the public, create benign employment for the overabundant propaganda workers, give face to educated people, and shift attention toward a clean, modern future of “civilization and courtesy” (*wenming limao*). The “five courteous phrases” were modeled as suitable for everyone regardless of political status. This first post-Mao mass mobilization, nailed together from a scrap heap of ideals, promoted what was conventionally translated as “establishing a socialist spiritual civilization” (*shehui zhuyi jingshen wenming jianshe*). Numbered goals featured “the Five Stresses, the Four Beautifuls, and the Three Ardent Loves” (*wu jiang, si mei, san re ai*). The Five Stresses were identified as cultivation, courtesy, sanitation, order, and morality (*wenming, limao, weisheng, chengxu, daoode*).

Figure 1 shows the Five Stresses mounted as slogans under a red star atop a city market. The Four Beautifuls were identified as spirit, speech, behavior, and the environment (*jingshen, yuyan, xingwei, huanjing*). The Three Ardent loves were the party, socialism, and the motherland (*dang, shehui zhuyi, zu guo*) (He and Huang 1988). Even these creaky party slogans revealed a significant ideological shift, a “political mobilization without politics” (Dirlik 1982, 373) away from collectivization and toward previously taboo psychological or “spiritual” issues. The emphasis on enlightenment implicitly validated the educated elite.

Mao’s successors appeared on television to model the five courteous phrases, a modernized link to the official as moral model. President Jiang Zemin, Premier Zhao Ziyang, senior leader Deng Xiaoping, and Youth Leaguers Hu Yaobang and
future premier Hu Jintao all broadcast their support during what became annual March courtesy and hygiene campaigns. These continue into the present, led especially by the Youth League and the Women’s Federation. Official language planners did not instigate the campaigns. Linguists value courtesy and signed on as cosponsors to a few of the 1980s proclamations. But any stance on language and social roles is politically risky, so they largely confine their efforts to the three goals set in the 1950s: standard Mandarin, Romanization, and simplified characters.

Sophisticates joked about the Five Stresses. A bar hung a neon sign advertising its own “Four Beautifuls” who worked there. Many people adapted the phrases. When senior leader Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978, student marchers greeted him with respectful banners saying, “Greetings, [honorific

Figure 1. Socialist courtesy. A red star and the “Five Stresses”—cultivation, courtesy, sanitation, order, and morality (jiang wenming, jiang limao, jiang weisheng, jiang cixu, jiang daode)—appear on a steel sign above a central market. The billboard below advertises Clear Springs Beer. (Author’s photo, Quanzhou, Fujian, May 1989)
Deng Xiaoping. By 1989, student protestors wore T-shirts picturing Deng on the front under the nonhonorific caption, “Greetings!” (ni hao!). “Please resign!” (qing xiaci!) was printed on the rear.

**Courtesy and Hygiene Revisited**

The March campaigns for courtesy and cleanliness coincide with the traditional spring cleaning and the grave sweeping festival (qing ming jie). Both verbal and environmental cleanup are goals, direct descendents of the early twentieth-century ideological links between a clean environment and good public behavior as essential to a modern nation. Campaigns urge “civilized behavior” such as picking up litter and giving free haircuts to the elderly, especially done by children, soldiers, and service workers (Chen and Yu 1985; Fujian sheng xiaoxue sixiang pinde bianxie zu 1992). Some campaigns have also targeted “spiritual pollution” (jingshen wuran), especially pornography and prostitution, or roundups of criminals in the “Strike Hard” crackdowns. Since 2000, courtesy has become part the “Speak Mandarin” campaigns and has been added to the elementary school curriculum. Newly painted signboards in 2007 enjoined citizens to be “civilized” (wenming) and to avoid the “ten don’ts” (shi bu). These vary slightly, as each city selects its own issues, but typically forbid spitting, littering, public urination, damaging plants in parks, jaywalking—and loud, crude language. Environmental protection, planting trees, and reducing air pollution (kongqi wuran) are linked to eliminating the “verbal pollution” (yuyan wuran) of coarse language, especially the “national curse” (guo ma), “his mother’s” (ta ma de). Figure 2 shows a well-dressed city man cleaning up his mouth by substituting “please,” “hello,” and “thanks” for the “national curse” and other bad language. A masked sanitation worker brushes these into a garbage cart “for both their protections.”

The push for verbal and environmental hygiene springs from a widely shared desire for a cleaner, more modern, and more civil public life. Premier Wen Jiabao’s push for a “harmonious society” attempts to capitalize on this longing. The urge to “clean up language,” which linguist Julia Cameron (1995) calls “verbal hygiene,” is not restricted to China but reflects a probably universal, passionate interest in “good language.” Verbal hygiene debates rage in the United States on topics from “hate speech” to “bad language,” “correct language,” and alleged “declines of language” and “language threats.” Professional linguists, as in China, focus on “objective” analysis and theory, abdicating a position on most debates. Instead, copy editors and the educated public set standards.

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8In ordinary life, first names are used only among very close friends. Even families use ranked titles such as “second eldest sister” (er jie). Using Deng’s first name, Xiaoping, on the banner adapted an imperial-era custom of warm but highly restricted ceremonial use of a person’s unique first name, without the clan-based surname. Central Committee members occasionally do this when giving speeches.
Debates grow heated because, as Cameron notes, “linguistic conventions are quite possibly the last repository of unquestioned authority for educated people in secular society” (1995, 12–18).

Language carries supreme significance as a marker of social power, Cameron argues, because group identity is so closely bound to language (as in race, gender, and language debates). People believe in the agency of language both as a “natural force” and as amenable to “language engineering.” Linguists do not find evidence that language, by itself, has a strong effect on behavior, absent support from multiple additional social forces. But public opinion forces language to stand in as a seemingly objective focus for what Cameron describes as “moral panics” over taboo issues: power struggles between people of different gender, race, class, or education. “More than mere civility is at stake. At stake is a power structure in which certain people, often without even being conscious of it, assume the right to tell other people who they are” (1995, 83, 144).

Figure 2. Verbal hygiene. A city dweller says, “Please, hello, thank you…” (qing, nin hao, xiexie) to a masked sanitation worker, who brushes coarse language such as “his mother’s,” “idiot,” and “moron” (ta ma de, bai chi, ben dan) into a garbage cart “for both their protections.” (Cartoon by Xu Chen and Xie Feng, in Zhongyang wenming ban mishu zu and Zhongguo kepu zuojia xiehui 2003, 50)
Contested, unsettled standards for courtesy reflect broader attempts to calibrate rights and responsibilities. As behavioral distinctions between males and females, old and young, give way to more uniform standards, collective morality is construed in many ways. Tension appears in highly politicized Chinese disagreements over how much to center morality around the clan, party discipline, or the broader public. Political campaigns have relaxed, but disagreements emerge over how much deference to offer an educated elite versus a broader, consumer-oriented public, including peasant migrant workers (Wakeman 1993). Many service centers have replaced their socialist banners of “serve the [common] people” (wei renmin fuwu) with signs that flatter the individual consumer by being “at your [honorific] service” (wei nin fuwu).

Schoolchildren and women service workers face the strongest pressures to change and are least able to resist (Fujian sheng xiaoxue sixiang pinde bianxie zu 1992). The feminization of courtesy is well under way (Huang 1978; Wang 1987). Television star Kan Yu-sai’s best seller carries the English title *Etiquette for the Modern Chinese* (2000). But the book’s Chinese title is *The Source of Charm* (Meili helai), and features chapters on fashion with a colored makeup chart. Private courtesy schools have sprung up all over the cities. Female, foreign-educated teachers are especially popular; lessons resemble the courtesy class that Wetzel (2004) completed in Tokyo.

Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore rejected Marxism, preferring to stress updated Confucian “family values.” Like the mainland, each stages regular campaigns for good public behavior, environmental cleanup, and courteous speech, which often includes speaking Mandarin. These provide important models for the mainland campaigns. Efforts to expand the Confucian tradition of collective responsibility are seldom framed as “good citizenship,” which remains associated with troublesome European ideals of individual rights. Even so, individual rights are increasingly invoked. Bo Yang notes that one characteristic of Western “civilization” is the recognition that other people deserve the same rights and respect: “If I step on your foot, naturally I say, ‘pardon me.’ Even if I haven’t hurt you, I still say, ‘pardon me’” (1985, 163). Even future President Jiang Zemin invoked individual rights to promote courtesy (Renmin ribao 1980).

Now that landlords have been eliminated, the party has no objection to people treating families, fellow villagers, or co-workers with the warmth of kinship courtesies. But urbanization has put hundreds of millions of Chinese in the unanticipated position of becoming strangers themselves in daily life. Some 44 percent of urban Chinese do not know even the names of their
neighbors (Fang 2003). Impersonal courtesies are better than none. Consumers embrace what they find useful from the courtesy campaigns, as the appetite for self-help has grown much more powerful than the party in spreading courtesy. From its first pages, Courtesy for Contemporary Chinese (Huang 1978) evokes a world of “strangers in the public sphere,” a crowded metropolis where “you are just one element in a mass society (qunzhong zhong de yi fenzi).” Courtesy is framed as a reciprocal right to good treatment on buses, elevators, escalators, and streets. One should initiate conversations by shaking hands and saying, “Hello, how are you?” (ni hao ma?), “avoid being combative,” and say, “I’m sorry” (dui bu qi) after coughing or stepping on someone’s foot.

Dozens of popular guides instruct readers on how to talk to strangers. The ancient custom of treating insiders differently from outsiders (nei wai you bie), the guides explain, becomes a handicap in the world of international sales—and lonely unmarried workers transferred far from home. Figure 3, from television star Kan Yu-sai’s courtesy guide (2000), demonstrates three new courtesies: a hurried but friendly “hello” between neighbors or co-workers, an adult bending down to speak considerately to a child, and a woman bowing slightly as she apologizes for bumping a father and child. By 2002, the phrases had become so indigenized that a Shanghai street hawker accosted customers with “Greetings!” (nin hao), berating those who ignored him as “so rude! so uncivilized!” (zenme mei limao! mei you wenhua!).

**International Incentives to Courtesy**

China holds that the twenty-first century will be “China’s century,” when other nations acknowledge it as “the world’s leading civilization.” When China faced inward, international comparisons were taboo, and criticisms of rudeness drew very heated denials. But with the rise of the export economy and with millions of Chinese traveling or studying abroad, Beijing has cleverly outsourced the criticism of its crude habits. International recognition offers a face-saving incentive for change. Appeals to local pride can draw in defiant groups: Texas effectively discouraged young men from throwing trash out of car windows with a “Don’t mess with Texas!” campaign. Shanghai’s six-year campaign to “Be a Lovable Shanghainese” aspires to international respect at the 2010 International Trade Fair. Even more prestige is on the line for the 2008 Olympics (Magnier 2005). Practical goals include preventing the football riots, complete with smashed heads and windshields, which can erupt when China loses a game to Korea or Puerto Rico. Shaming the public with tales of foreigners who behave better than Chinese is a new tactic. Wide publicity greets reports of countries that dread onslaughts of loud, messy mainland tourists and of Korean tourists who pick up litter at Chinese beauty spots (Arnold 2005; Wu 2005).
Figure 3. Model situations from a courtesy guide. Top: A quick but honorific “hello” (nin hao) to a neighbor or coworker. Center: An adult offers to reach a book down for a child, “you’re so short, I’ll help you get it.” Bottom: A smiling woman bows slightly to man and child, saying “I’m sorry, I bumped you” (dui bu qi, wo peng le ni) (cartoon by Pan Shunqi, in Kan 2000, 40).
The coastal economic boom, the return of Hong Kong, and increased contacts with Taiwan, Singapore, and Overseas Chinese provide an aura of modernity to massively retool Confucian courtesies. Class differences remain. Courtesy costs nothing and may lubricate the growing social gaps. The income gap between rich and poor is greater than at any time since the 1940s. Prosperity has probably increased public deference to the rich. Intellectuals are also lobbying for renewed deference. A few Chinese may dream of receiving a prostration (ketou), but few want to perform one. Most courtesy campaigns focus on teaching children and women service workers how to bow and speak courteously to teachers and parents, customers, and superiors. Far fewer courtesies are directed toward them. Neither revolution nor economic reform has erased power or rank, or the social irritants and unguents that connect them. A broad, reciprocal public civility remains a partially articulated ideal. But the main beneficiaries will be local Chinese.

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